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ABSTRACT

To meet public scrutiny and increased demands for quality public education, schools must plan. Developing legitimate plans depends on the ability to recognize the patterns that guide current practice and uncover those that will create change. Educators need to understand the planning concepts that have helped business meet new challenges. To bring about the systemic change called for in education reform, strategic planning must be used. Strategic planning in education can help school districts identify beliefs and values of education, establish goals and purposes, prepare for change, involve the community, and set objectives in meeting the needs of students and the community. Strategic planning must also include respect for individual viewpoints and for the value of the accomplishments of the past. There are 10 steps to successful strategic planning for education: discuss strategic planning with the board of education, appoint a strategic-planning team, collect evidence to support change, examine strengths and limitations, develop a mission statement, identify objectives, discuss best hopes and worst fears, write an implementation plan, implement the plan, and institutionalize the process. (Contains 22 references.) (JPT)

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Planning, Processing, and Action Leads to Quality Schools

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Planning, Processing, and Action Leads to Quality Schools

Introduction

Schools, especially public schools, are under the watchful eyes of parents, politicians, business leaders, taxpayers leagues, and educators, to name a few. Those who observe schools and those who work in them want schools to change. However, the agenda for change varies widely from group to group. Professional educators must act carefully and rationally to guide their school districts through the maze of school reform. While many voices need to enter the dialogue about the changes that will lead schools to a productive future, planners must allow time to process the ideas that will guide these efforts. Once they are armed with a clear mission and viable objectives to accomplish it, educators and their constituents must act decisively to implement the plans. Planning, processing, and action are key ingredients that will lead to quality schools.

The development of legitimate plans depends on the ability to recognize the patterns that guide current practice and to uncover the codes that will drive new practice. Educators need to be familiar with planning concepts that assisted business to prepare for new environments. When changes occur at all levels of the economic and political systems, changes in the educational arena are not far behind.

Understanding Patterns

Patterns, routines, and codes are part of everything we do. Some patterns are constructed to reveal beauty or order or process. Many patterns occur in nature, for example; the chance markings that serve to protect animals by camouflaging them from predators. Other patterns of nature serve to mark transitions from season to season. These patterns have guided the behavior and activities of mankind for centuries. People have adjusted to and become comfortable with these naturally recurrent themes. But that is Nature; not all patterns are as ordered or recognizable in the world created by humans.

In The Third Wave , Toffler (1980) reminded us of a variety of patterns at work in the world. He stated,

> **"Every civilization has a hidden code; a set of rules or principles that run through all of its activities like a repeated design. As industrialism spread across the planet, its unique, hidden design became visible. It consisted of six interrelated principles that programmed the behavior of millions."**

The six principles to which Toffler referred were standardization, specialization, synchronization, concentration, maximization, and centralization. These principles, some which evolved from Frederick W. Taylor 's (1911) work with the methodologies of scientific management, held that if certain, prescribed procedures were followed the efficiency and effectiveness of organizations could be enhanced. These six principles dominated the thinking of management and labor during the first half of the 20th Century and were as important and necessary to the success of industrialization as they may be out of place in the mainstream of the 21st Century. New knowledge changed the environment of the work place. It appears that Industrialism has now given way to the Age of Information, an age in which knowledge has become a readily available and instantly renewable source of wealth. Toffler (1990a) offered a view of that change; "And if it is true that a new knowledge-based economy is super-seding smokestack production, then we should expect a historic struggle to remake our political institutions, bringing them into congruence with the revolutionary post-mass production economy." This different set of codes should be of great interest to educators because they will serve as guidelines for the political scene, the work culture, and the educational process. A new set of codes carry with them the obligation to change.

The Challenges of Change

Change is not a simple process. It involves new learning, the replacement of old habits, and the development of new attitudes. In almost every case, change requires a movement away from the comfort of the understandable and familiar. Bisesi (1983) referred to the "periods of comfort with "the way things were" as a time of frozen evaluation.

> **"During these times," he said, "the view of what used to be serves as protection against what might become. And once we have found cozy niches for people, organizations, or societies we fix those descriptions in our minds as immutable reference points."**

For organizations to evolve they must overcome the forces that hold them to the immutable reference points and zones of comfort. These changes may cause discomfort and distrust and to further complicate the situation, many changes must occur rather quickly if the organization is to survive. This was not so during the early decades of the Agricultural Age. Changes came slowly. The dependance of agriculture on natural energy sources and manual labor left no other choice, but when processed energy replaced old fashioned "horsepower", the speed of change increased. While the

Industrial Age fundamentally changed the nature of work, it did not compare with the structural changes introduced during the Age of Information. Toffler (1990b), described it this way;

> **"the new system for making wealth (information and knowledge systems) is totally dependent on the instant communication and dissemination of data, ideas, symbols, and symbolism. It is, as we will discover, a super-symbolic economy in the exact sense of that term."**

This new system depended on speed and accuracy; the speed to deliver accurate and important information, ideas, and symbols to waiting audiences, faster than the competition! The impact was instant and world-wide. As information became a real economic tool during the latter part of the 20th Century, successful business practice dictated more streamlined methodologies. Profitmaking organizations were quick to make the shift to the information society. The necessity to revise their structures and services was driven by the bottom line. The complicated, bureaucratic structures that guided their actions during the industrial era were replaced with empowering ideas that led to increased worker creativity and production.

While social institutions, such as schools, were slower to respond to the new system of wealth creation, they have certainly been impacted by it. As an example, the constant demand for new educational strategies and the preparation of technologically literate workers are part of the American business agenda.

Systemic Change

Those who study systemic change understand that all subsytems of the larger system must change at nearly the same time; if one subsystem moves too slowly, an entire system may languish and die. If a subsystem changes too rapidly, it is likely to explode the larger system. Naturally, where the viability of national economies are concerned, questions about linkages with the educational system, a key component or subsystem of the larger economic system, come into question.

During the 1980's, as the American economy began to slow, political pressure was applied in an attempt to change the structure of the American Public Education System. The publication of A Nation At Risk (1983) challenged the nation to examine it's public schools in light of new technologies and the changing workplace. Change advocates emphasized dismantling the structures that locked schools in the industrial age. The

perceived problem with public education was that it had remained fairly static when the larger society was engulfed in change. Banathy (1988, p.53) has surmised, "there is a dangerous evolutionary gap - a discrepancy between the recently emerged societal image and the still prevailing outdated image of education, educational organizations, and educational leadership."

Change for America's schools has been high on the national agenda for the past decade. America is about to enter a time when it will likely experiment with privatization of public education; that is, to turn over certain features of education to private contractors. For example, a company known as Education Alternatives, Inc. has contracted with the Baltimore Public Schools to operate some of its elementary buildings. The Whittle Organization (The Edison Project) has proposed new schools or "school takeovers" to put in place a new model of education. Other restructuring efforts will take place along side of the current school system. The New Schools Development Corporation has approved almost a dozen experimental school models to place beside public schools so results can be compared. Many more models will follow.

It is incumbent on public schools, their partners, and constituents to proceed with plans to accommodate change. The call for change is not likely to disappear.

The Language of Change

Reform, reframe, and restructure action words used by parents, business people, politicians, scholars and practitioners when proposed changes in the American Public Education system are debated. Much has been written about the need to fundamentally change schools, yet very few people have been able to identify or accept proposals for changes in the current paradigm of schooling. What are the implications of school reform? What is meant by restructuring? The following definition of school restructuring by Conley (1991) provided some assistance:

> **"activities that change fundamental assumptions, practices and relationships, both within the organization, and between the organization and the outside world in ways that lead to varied and improved student learning outcomes for essentially all students."**

Conley's definition linked the world of education to the "outside world" and called for reflection about the outcomes expected for the heterogeneous audience served in the public schools. It was a definition that addressed all

students. The language itself implied more than change around the fringes. To help frame the kind of changes that will be necessary, Cuban (1988) categorized innovations into first and second order changes. First order changes were described as incremental improvements of the current system; in other words, doing better that which is already being done, but without any alteration of the current structure. Second order changes, on the other hand, involve fundamental structural changes; changes resulting in new practice and methodology. The agenda for the restructuring of schools appears to call for second order change. What kind of ideas must be offered to provide for such monumental change?

The Power of Ideas

Success begins with a dream; a best hope for the future! School leaders with positive views of the future enhance opportunities for learning and create environments friendly to the learning process. "In dreams", said Yeats, "begins responsibility." So it is with a vision for schools that will "essentially serve all children." Thoreau, in writing about his experiences at Walden Pond, said, "I have learned this at least by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life he imagined, he will meet with success unexpected in common hours."

Unlike Thoreau's dream, which dealt with the way an individual led life, the vision for schools must satisfy a large and diverse public. It must be developed as a shared vision with a variety of audiences if it is to meet with success. Second, if extraordinary changes are necessary to enable the restructured school to become a reality, adequate time must be provided for ideas and alternatives to be discussed and processed. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the dream or vision of what will best serve the needs of children requires action. To paraphrase Thoreau, the school and community must advance confidently in the direction of their vision. How can schools and their communities create meaning for education and advance in the direction of their dreams?

Strategic Planning: Accommodating the Reality of Change

Strategic planning, an innovation credited to Harvard University during the 1920's, was first taught as an approach to assist business and government to address their changing circumstances in new environments (Bryson, Freeman, Roering, 1985). It called for a thorough examination of the purposes for which an organization exists. Because it is different from traditional, long-range planning, strategic planning appears to meet the

needs of educational institutions engaged in serious efforts to meet the needs of changing environments. Epsy (1986) defined strategic planning in terms of its difference from long-range planning; "Strategic planning is focused on reaching specific, well defined goals designed to benefit the organization as a whole. Strategic planning deals with some very fundamental questions of organizational identity and integrity. It assumes a willingness to take an honest look at the entire operation with an eye to improvement and change." Many other definitions focused attention on an examination of the mission of the organization and how it directed it's resources (people, time, money, and technology) to activities that supported the mission.

There are some common elements that characterize the strategic planning process. Bryson (1988, p.48) described eight activities that need to be considered when putting a plan together:

1. **An agreement with leadership to initiate a strategic plan**
2. **Identification of mandates of the organization**
3. **A clarification of the organizational values and mission**
4. **An assessment of the external environment**
5. **An assessment of the internal environment (strengths and weaknesses)**
6. **An identification of strategic issues facing the organization**
7. **Formulation of strategies aimed at managing the issues**
8. **Establish an effective organizational vision for the future.**

While the process Bryson described was intended for business, it can also be tailored to meet the needs of school systems. It is important to remind those who wish to engage in strategic planning for schools that one outcome of the process is to clarify and articulate the purpose and function of the school in light of the constantly changing social, economic, and political circumstances. Too often school boards and administrators incorrectly assume that those who work in the schools and those who are served by them are very familiar with its mission. Schlechty (1990) reminded us that in an environment of restructuring and reform, the meaning of school had to be considered:

> **"Before school reform can proceed, those who lead schools, those who influence these leaders, those who follow, and those who are called upon to provide support must think clearly about the purpose of schools and the schooling enterprise."**

A statement of purpose or mission statement serves as a guiding force for the activities of the school district.

For the purposes of this paper, **strategic planning** is defined as a dynamic process used to position a school or school district to fulfill it's mission in a rapidly changing environment. To provide meaning to the definition, strategic planning must be explained in operational terms. By utilizing strategic planning processes a school district will be able to:

1. **Embrace and articulate the underlying beliefs and values that provide a foundation for the education of children,**
2. **identify the goals and purposes of schools,**
3. **collect and assess the evidence that leads schools to change,**
4. **provide for community involvement in educational planning, and**
5. **identify high priority objectives that will assist the school in meeting the needs of students and community.**

Planning For Quality Schools: Essential Elements

Quality schools are be important to everyone, however, the definition of "quality" varies from group to group. Expectations for and outcomes of schooling become the benchmarks for the assessment of quality. Both can best be understood when there is an opportunity for **dialogue.** The purpose of dialogue, as described by Senge (1990) is "to go beyond any one individual's understanding. In dialogue, a group explores difficult issues from many points of view." They begin to think together; to think as a team. As dialogue with teachers, community members, and others begins, it is important to remember two critical rules. They are:

1. **Listen with respect, and**
2. **Honor the past.**

Everyone has a point of view and it may or may not agree with yours. Listen to the views of others with respect. Try to understand the mental models people use or the experiences they bring to the situation. Covey (1989) said it best when he wrote about the fifth habit of highly effective people; "first seek to understand, then to be understood." It is important to have as many voices as possible in the conversation about quality schools.

Honoring the past is too often overlooked. Many people in the school and community dedicated years of hard work to benefit the school. Regardless of the planner's readiness to change things, time must be invested in honoring that history or the culture of the school. When this step is omitted, the message received, unintentionally or not, is all the time and effort that was invested in the past was not important; people who were involved in the past are not important; it is only the future that matters. When the past is not acknowledged and honored resentment toward the proposed changes may be increased.

It is also important to remember that most people do not invest every waking moment planning for the distant future. When school leaders bring a group of teachers, administrators, board members, and citizens together to formulate plans for the future they must be given adequate time to **process** the information they receive and the ideas they create. If a planning group has inadequate time to think about new information and ideas, they begin to feel pressured and uncertain. Eventually, the process will become unproductive. Time between meetings and time at the beginning of every new meeting should be devoted to a review of the ideas that have already been discussed. Reflection and review (processing) are time consuming, but critical to the success of strategic planning.

The following model is proposed to assist schools with successful strategic planning. It combines important elements from the strategic plans used in business with ideas that developed from working with educational clients.

I. **Discuss Strategic Planning with the Board of Education: Obtain Permission to Proceed.**
   A. It is advisable to obtain the services of a neutral, third party to facilitate the plan. This allows several board members and the superintendent to be an active part of the strategic planning team.

II. **Appoint a Strategic Planning Team**
   A. The team should be composed of school, community, and student representatives. A diversity of interests and opinions should be accommodated.
      1. A workable number of people on a strategic planning team appears to be 20 to 25. The superintendent and several Board of Education members are included in this number.
   B. Members of the strategic planning team should be advised that their time and energy will be needed for at least one

year. During that year they are likely to devote 100 to 120 hours of work to the planning process.

III. **Collect Evidence to Support Change**

A. The strategic planning team should begin its work with an analysis of the current condition, status, or perceptions of American Education.
   1. This can be done within the strategic planning group or in public forums or town hall meetings where citizens are issued an open invitation to attend.
   2. An example of an opening question is, "what evidence exists to support the necessity of change in America's Public Schools?
   3. After national-level conditions are analyzed and evidence is developed to support the need for change, ask if any of the evidence is applicable to the local school situation?

B. Please notice that evidence is the key word at this stage. Evidence to support change is far different from emotion about change. During this phase of the process it is very important to separate emotion from evidence!

IV. **Examine Strengths and Limitations of the School**

A. A strength is a condition that enhances the ability of the school to perform well and a limitation is the type of condition that inhibits the desired level of performance.

V. **Develop a Mission Statement**

A. With the information about national and local conditions in hand, focus the attention of the group on the beliefs that form the foundation for schools.

B. After recording statements about the beliefs about schools/education, ask members of the strategic planning team to reach consensus on the most commonly held beliefs and compile them into a collective statement. The collective, "we believe", statement will serve as a basis for a mission statement that will define the purpose and function of the school.

C. The mission statement should be concise and should define the purpose and function of the school.

VI. Identify Objectives or Intended Outcomes

A. It is important to identify the objectives that will need to be accomplished to carry out the mission of the school. If possible, select no more than 3-5 high priority objectives.
   1. Objectives should be stated as clearly and concisely as possible. Even though they are intended to be broad and general, they must leave no room for doubt as to what is to be accomplished. i.e.; *The school district will design and implement a comprehensive staff development program for all employees.*
   2. It is advisable to identify a time frame for each objective; i.e.; By 1996 or by June of 1995, the school district will design and implement a staff development program . .

VII. Discuss Best Hopes and Worst Fears

A. The purpose of this exercise is to identify the best hope for the school district if an objective was accomplished and to identify the worst fears about operationalizing each objective. This discussion helps members of the team visualize possible scenarios that could develop if the objectives were placed into action.
   1. The "best hopes" and "worst fears" discussion serves to identify barriers to implementation and overcome anxiety about change.

VIII. Write an Implementation Plan

A. Each objective must be accompanied by a detailed plan that outlines every activity and task that will be necessary to successfully implement the objective.
   1. Describe each activity required to accomplish the objective. If, for example,10-15 activities are needed for implementation, each activity must be broken down into a series of smaller, detailed tasks. Tasks are the smallest unit of the plan.

B. The resources necessary to implement each objective must be addressed in this portion of the plan: How much time and money; how many people; how much material and equipment?

IX. Implement the Plans.

A. When the detailed plans are complete and have been "approved" by the strategic planning team, they are

forwarded to the Board of Education for discussion and approval. The board has the final authority to determine if the plan is acceptable.

B. After approval by the Board of Education, each objective must be assigned to an educator with the understanding that he/she has the responsibility for implementation. Typically, the Superintendent and his/her staff will have primary responsibility for implementation, but some plans may best be implemented by teams of administrators and teachers.

X. **Institutionalize the Process**

A. Issue progress reports at board meetings; at least quarterly.
B. Schedule an annual review of the process with the strategic planning team.
   1. Review the progress of the plan
   2. When one of the objectives has been accomplished, develop another one.

Steps one through eight, the **planning phase**, can be accomplished in seven to nine months. This allows for time between meetings so team members can reflect on and process the data that has been provided and the new information it has generated. The **implementation phase** will take as long as required to place the objective into action; it may range from a few months to several years. The implementation phase is critical. It is at this point where many planning processes are defeated by lack of action.

It is very important to monitor progress of the implementation phase. It may become necessary to make adjustments in the implementation plan to accommodate new information or to save time or other resources. It is perfectly acceptable to modify implementation procedures as long as the objective is not compromised. When changes to the implementation plan are modified, be certain to communicate all changes to the Board of Education and Strategic Planning Team. Good communication pays dividends and builds trust in both the process and the leader.

Lorange (1979) discussed a variety of lessons for effective implementation. Among the most important lessons were:

1. **to make certain the users of the plan understand the real benefits that will result from the plan and to get an early commitment from the user (shared mission),**

2. **to break the relatively complex overall planning task into small, understandable elements (activities and tasks),**
3. **to ensure the user that the plan is supported (by the board and administration),**
4. **to design the plan as an evolutionary process not a revolution, and**
5. **to deal realistically with the assessment of resources necessary to achieve the objective.**

Conclusion

Public education in America, to be effective for all children, needs to change. The changes must be carefully and thoughtfully planned. As much as possible, the schoolhouse door needs to be opened to the stakeholders so they can exchange their view of reality with the views of educators. It is in this setting that strategic planning offers hope and promise for school districts.

The provision of quality education cannot be left to chance. It requires serious attention and well founded planning strategies. However, the models or methods used to bring about change should not be difficult to understand or use. The strategic planning model presented in this paper was designed to be "education friendly." While it requires a great deal of hard work and a sincere interest in dialogue with stakeholders, it does work. Hopefully, some of its features will appeal to educational leaders so they can use it as a tool for school restructuring.

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